Spenser's Monsters:
A Response to Maik Goth[*]

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Maik Goth's essay "Spenser as Prometheus: The Monstrous and the Idea of Poetic Creation" argues that Spenser associated poetic creation in general, and his own craftsmanship in particular, with monstrosity and an open defiance of the principles of nature so revered by neo-classical critics. As Goth reminds us, Spenser filled *The Faerie Queene* with accounts of monstrous creation that shadow the poet's own creative enterprise. Archimago—whose name reveals him etymologically to be a great crafter of images—fashions a false Una to deceive the Redcrosse Knight. An unnamed witch creates a simulacrum of the beautiful Florimell to appease her son's desires from the same natural elements that Petrarchan poets transformed into metaphors: snow, vermillion, golden wires, and burning lamps. Goth compares these moments in Spenser to Philip Sidney's evocations of the poet's capacity to make "things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, as the heroes, demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies, and such like" (Sidney 64).

For Goth, the primary Spenserian focus of that Sidneyan confidence in human creativity is Prometheus's fashioning of the first Elf in Book II, Canto X of *The Faerie Queene*. There the faerie Guyon discovers the history of his own Elfin race inscribed in a chronicle:

> It told, how first *Prometheus* did create
> A man, of many parts from beasts deryu'd,

> And then stole fire from heuen, to animate
> His worke, for which he was by *Ioue* depryu'd
> Of life him self, and hart-strings of an Aegle ryu'd. (II.x.70.5-9)

Goth correctly locates sources for this passage in Horace and Natale Conti (cf. 188). There may be yet another important humanist source, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oratio de hominis dignitate*. In the opening paragraphs, Pico relates how God made Man after he had already created everything else in the universe and assigned it its proper place. Having nothing distinctive left with which to endow him, God gave him the power to choose his destiny:

> We have given you, O Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgement and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine. (8-9)

As in Spenser, the human creature exhibits both bestial and divine aspects. Neither wholly one nor the other, he alone enjoys the ability to "fashion yourself in the form you may prefer." In a sense, God creates humanity to create itself. Man's creative capacity is the surest sign of his divine origin. But depending on how he uses that capacity, he may either ascend to the angels or descend to the animal creation.

Pico's retelling of the creation story, with its several points of analogy to the Prometheus myth, would have intrigued Spenser because of its emphasis on humanity's moral self-fashioning. After all, Spenser tells us in the "Letter to Raleigh," appended to the 1590 *Faerie Queene*,

that "[t]he generall end therefore of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline" (714). For all writers in the high humanist tradition, the belief that humanity can be schooled in "vertuous and gentle discipline" justifies the writing of poetry. The poet not only creates verse, but that verse in turn transforms its readership into moral beings. Poetry ultimately completes their creation as beings capable of rising "to the superior orders whose life is divine." Like Prometheus in the mythographic tradition that Goth relates, the poet fosters civilization.

In contrast to Pico, Conti, and the other writers on which they drew, however, Sidney and Spenser were not only humanists. They were also Protestants. Sidney and Spenser's shared Protestantism may explain one puzzling aspect of their concept of poetic genesis that Goth never fully addresses: why, in thinking about the poets' power to create a golden world independent of quotidian experience, did they fill it with monsters? To some extent, the giants, dragons, and gorgons in *The Faerie Queene* contribute to its didactic agenda by allegorizing the vices it urges its readers to resist. But that is not the whole story. The fact that most of the poem's interior poets are sorcerers or contrivers of horror may signal flagging confidence in the whole humanist enterprise both Sidney and Spenser ostensibly espouse. In short, it may signal a Protestant sense that humanity is finally incapable of bettering its moral condition outside a state of Grace. As Spenser puts it in Book I of *The Faerie Queene*, just before Redcrosse's apocalyptic encounter with the Dragon, "If any strength we haue, it is to ill" (I.x.1.8).

The crux of Sidney and Spenser's predicament is the Protestant theology of the Fall. The reformers' emphasis on predestination and the bondage of the will shortcircuited the humanist education program.[1] From the perspective of Luther, Calvin, and their many English followers, human beings were not free to fashion themselves in any way they wished. They might aspire to the nature of the angels, but their fallen will made them worse than beasts. The glimmerings of a lost capacity for good made them all the more monstrous. In *On the*

Bondage of the Will, Luther repeatedly used the word "monstrous" to refer to humanity's moral blindness and incapacity for good:

> And what can be more monstrous! "The light (saith Christ) shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehendeth it not," John i.! Who could believe this? Who hath heard the like—that the light should shine in darkness, and yet, the darkness still remain darkness, and not be enlightened! (102)

> "Free-will" is defined to be of that impotency, 'that it cannot will any thing good without grace, but is compelled into the service of sin; though it has an endeavour, which, nevertheless, is not to be ascribed to its own powers.'—A monster truly! which, at the same time, can do nothing by its own power, and yet, has an endeavour within its own power: and thus, stands upon the basis of a most manifest contradiction! (164-65)

In *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin famously declared that "Wherefore, although we grant that the image of God was not utterly effaced and destroyed in him, it was, however, so corrupted, that any thing which remains is fearful deformity […]" (107). He makes the same point in similar language in his *Commentary on Genesis*: "But now, although some obscure lineaments of that image are found remaining in us; yet are they so vitiated and maimed, that they may truly be said to be destroyed. For besides the deformity which everywhere appears unsightly, this evil also is added, that no part is free from the infection of sin" (49).

This pessimistic view of humanity's bondage to sin limits Sidney's confidence in poetry's capacity to improve the moral lives of its readers.[2] His Protestant misgivings surface only a few sentences after the passage that Goth quotes:

> Neither let it be deemed too saucy a comparison to balance the highest point of man's wit with the efficacy of nature, but rather give right honor to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who, having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature. Which in nothing he showeth so much as in poetry, when with the force of a divine breath he bringeth things forth surpassing her doings, with no small argument to the incredulous of that first accursed fall of Adam, since our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it. (65-66)

This passage begins with the standard, humanist tribute to the imagination's capacity to outstrip nature. Almost as if fearing that such claims might sound hubristic, Sidney reframes them not just as a compliment to human ingenuity, but to the God who first endowed humanity with an element of His own creative power. God has not only given people dominion over nature, but also blessed them with an imagination that can even surpass the works of nature by envisioning "heroes, demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies, and such like." For Sidney, our capacity to create is the ultimate proof of our creation in the image of our divine Creator.

But if our creative powers attest to divine creation, they also remind us of our present depravity. Just at the point when his exhilaration over the imagination's power to overgo nature brings Sidney to an almost blasphemous identification with God, he integrates it into a classically Protestant lament on the bondage of the will. Humanity's poetic powers signal not only the exalted beginning of Adam's story but also its tragic conclusion. Fallen humanity can imagine a golden world, but lacks the purity and freedom of will to bring it into concrete existence. In the classic humanist paradigm, the poet can bring a better world into being by inspiring his or her readers to live more moral lives. Sidney trumpets that message throughout the *Apology*, but he finally doubts its applicability to a fallen world. Despite all the talk about golden worlds glimpsed by the imagination, Sidney believes as a Protestant that the world he inhabits is brazen in the extreme, so hardened in sin that it can only be redeemed by grace. Poetry finally occupies a position in Sidney's aesthetic parallel to the Law in Luther's theology. It serves first and foremost as an indictment of our fallen state rather than as a sufficient means to amelioration.

The contrast with Pico is striking. In the *Oratio*, Pico retold the creation story without any reference to a fall. Endowed with a free will, humanity can rise to the angelic or degenerate into the bestial. In Sidney's *Apology*, that choice is tragically limited. People can never redeem themselves from the depravity that Protestant writers insisted made them worse than beasts in the sight of God. As in Luther and

Calvin, they are monstrously divided beings, glimpsing an angelic perfection they can never attain. It is no wonder that Sidney's catalogue of what the human mind can conjure up—"heroes, demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies"—rapidly descends into variations on monstrosity.

Numerous critics have commented on the fundamentally Protestant character of Book I of *The Faerie Queene*.[3] At its simplest level, Redcrosse's career unfolds as a series of tragic lapses and rescues by forces outside himself that betoken grace: Una, Arthur, and the providential accident of collapsing beside the Well and Tree of Life. Every episode emphasizes the limits of his abilities and knowledge. Redcrosse stands about as far as you can get from Pico's humanist hero who chooses the path of virtue through sheer force of will. Singularly incapable of learning, he makes the same mistakes over and over. As an early anti-hero in English literary history, however, he does have something in common with Sidney, grasping for virtue but prevented by his "infected will" from ever achieving it. He is less an Aeneas or a Cyrus than a Protestant Everyman whose story every reader will eventually reenact not by choice but through tragic necessity.

Critics should be wary of applying Book I's more confessional lessons to *The Faerie Queene's* later books, which focus more on the moral victories humanity can achieve within the limited order of nature. But even in the later books, the monsters tend to figure aspects of the individual or social character that can never be fully dispelled. The moment you kill one monster, another one pops up to take its place. Regardless of all the poem's niceties of ethical distinction, there is a sense in which all the monsters are finally one monster, the "infected will" that so defines human character in the Protestant tradition. The poem's proliferation and iteration of monsters underlies the virulence of the corpse-like Maleger, who recovers strength whenever he falls to the ground. Only Arthur, who figures a more-than-mortal agency throughout the poem, can defeat him by throwing him into a lake. Scholars have long recognized that moment as an allegory of human-

ity's dependence on baptismal grace to overcome the bondage of the old Adam, the corruption of morality that Maleger embodies.[4]

Goth has identified several humanist subtexts for the Elfin chronicle that Guyon reads only a canto before Maleger's appearance. I have added Pico to the mix. The more we read that episode in the context of other actions in Book II, however, the more difficult it is to accept it solely as an affirmation of the humanist confidence in poetry's power to restrain vice and inspire virtue. There is something disturbingly necrophilic about the fact that Prometheus stitches the first Elf together out of the parts of beasts. As Goth correctly notes, Spenser literalizes those parts in a rather queasy-making opposition to Conti, who allegorized them as character traits that people share with various animals. That necrophilic tendency to play with body parts eerily foreshadows Maleger, who not only looks like an animated corpse himself but sports "an Helmet light, / Made of a dead mans skull" (II.xi.22.8-9). With its bifurcated identity as an amalgamation of animal part ensouled by heavenly fire, the first Elf glances back to Luther's and Calvin's characterization of humanity suspended between virtuous aspirations and the limits of a mortal, fallen will.

The "*Antiquitee* of *Faery*" (II.ix.60.2) in which Guyon discovers the story of the first Elf is only one of the books in Eumnestes's cell. While Guyon is reading it, Arthur discovers his racial origins in "*Briton moniments*" (II.ix.59.6). The fairy chronicle presents a brief and idealized account of recent Tudor history in which the "mightie *Oberon*" (Henry VIII; II.x.75.8) bequeaths his throne to "the fairest *Tanaquill*" (76.4) or Gloriana (Elizabeth I). The allegory excludes Henry VIII's other children, Edward VI's untimely death, the enmity between Elizabeth and her sister Mary, and whatever else that might make the Tudor past seem less-than-glorious. "*Briton moniments*," on the other hand, is much truer to history, at least as Geoffrey of Monmouth, Spenser's principal source, portrayed it. Its title alone, with its echo of the Latin "*monere*," opens the possibility that it serves more as a warning than as a commemorative celebration of the British past. There is very little heroism here. The chronicle includes so many instances of

betrayal, infighting, and meaningless violence that it leaves Spenser's reader wondering why it fills Arthur with so much patriotic pride.

This is one of the few places in *The Faerie Queene* where the distinction between fairies and human beings seems to matter. By pairing the two chronicles, Spenser brackets aside any confidence in the ameliorative force of poetry that might still linger around the story of Prometheus. The Elfen history is indeed progressive, with one moment of national glory succeeding the next until they all culminate in the glorious reign of Tanaquill. But this is finally a history of fairies, not human beings. The human past, commemorated in "*Briton moniments*" is a saga of unremitting, shapeless brutality underscored by yet another pun in the title. The brutishness of the Britons reminds us again of a primal darkness in humanity that resists the most lofty educational programs.

Maik Goth's essay on the figure of Prometheus reminds us of the powerful connection between form and ideology in Spenser and other writers. The humanist belief that poetry participated in the divine ordering of the world underlay Spenser's sense of his vocation. The monsters that seem to proliferate so endlessly in *The Faerie Queene* attest to the fecundity of the human imagination. But humanism was not the only force shaping the poem, nor were writers like Conti the only ones thinking hard about the category of the monstrous. Monstrosity also figured in the Protestant worlds of Luther and Calvin, where it signaled the quintessential predicament of humans once created in the divine image but now cursed with an "infected will." Spenser's distinctive poetic arose from the collision between these radically different ways of imagining humanity's relationship to the creation.

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NOTES

[1]See Strauss, *Luther's House of Learning*.

[2]See Weiner, *Sir Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Protestantism*. My own thinking about Sidney in this response is profoundly indebted to Weiner.

[3]See, e.g., King 183-232; Hume 72-106.

[4]See Philip B. Rollinson's entry on "Maleger" in *The Spenser Encyclopedia* 449-50.

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Monsters by Empathy Test, released 22 May 2020 1. Monsters 2. Empty Handed (Album Version) 3. Doubts 4. Making Worlds 5. Stop 6. Holy Rivers (Album Version) 7. Fear of Disappearing 8. Incubation Song (Album Version) 9. Skin 10. Love Moves London (UK) based Empathy Test's third studio album, Monsters, releases 22nd May 2020 and builds on the modern synth pop sound of their previous albums, adding live acoustic drums and synthesisers to the mix to capture the energy of the band's live shows. When it's stacking up inside From the corners of your mind. When the teardrops start to flow - oh! Maybe it's time to go Maybe it's time to go Baby I've got the monsters Baby I've got the monsters Baby I've got the monsters Baby I've got the monsters Again. Maik Goth's stated aim is "a comprehensive reading of monsters and monstrous beings" throughout the whole of The Faerie Queene. Parts I and II of this ambitious, innovative contribution to Spenser studies place The Faerie Queene's monsters in the context of teratological, historical, and literary perspectives on the monstrous, and offer a valuable taxonomic account under six headings: dragons, four-footed beasts, human-animal composites, giants, monstrous humans, and automata. Part III analyzes their relevance to Early Modern discourse on poetic creation and advances Goth's illuminating theory